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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000181

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: REFORM CANDIDATES MAKE GAINS AS POLLS  
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REF: COLOMBO 0149

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY: With one exception, polls to elect representatives to the People's Majlis, or Parliament, closed throughout this island nation on January 22. Although counting continues, preliminary results indicate a solid showing for pro-reform candidates, with the Presidential Spokesman predicting they will capture nearly a quarter of the seats. Mohammad Latheef, the head of the Maldivian Democratic Party, termed the results "a resounding victory" that strengthens the case for legalizing political parties in the Maldives. End summary.

**¶2.** (U) With one exception, polls to elect representatives to the People's Majlis closed on time on January 22. (Note: The one exception was a resort island on which many of the residents are workers registered to vote in other constituencies. Polling closed there the following day, and the ballot box reached the counting center in Male' by 10:00 p.m. that night. End note.) According to Ismail Habeeb, a member of the Election Task Force, counting had been completed in 4 of the 21 constituencies as of late morning January 24. Counting was proceeding smoothly, Habeeb said, with no evidence of irregularities. He added that representatives from both SAARC and the Commonwealth Secretariat were observing the process. Final results are

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not expected to be announced until late January 26.

**¶3.** (SBU) Rasheeda Ali, a member of the Maldivian Human Rights Commission (MHRC), said that the MHRC had not received any feedback as of mid-morning January 24 from the 25 election monitors it had trained. (Note: Our colleagues at Commonwealth missions in Colombo tell us that they have not yet received a read-out from the Commonwealth observer team either.) According to Ali, the MHRC had received only one report of a disturbance on election day: a scuffle at a polling station in the capital city of Male' in which five people were arrested. Presidential Spokesman Dr. Ahmed Shaheed told us that the incident was orchestrated by "thugs" in the pay of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). Shaheed added that only one person--who he said was found in possession of a knife--remained in detention as of January 24.

**¶4.** (SBU) Despite the logistical constraints posed by the recent tsunami, the entire voting process had been conducted "credibly," Shaheed told poloff, as evidenced by the strong showing posted by pro-reform candidates. Based on preliminary returns, Shaheed predicted that MDP candidates would win 8-10 of the 42 available seats. (Note: The most notable winner appears to be Ibrahim Ismail, one of four pro-reform Special Majlis MPs who had been detained and charged with sedition by the Government following the August 12-13 civil unrest. Ismail outpaced 13 other contenders as the highest vote-getter in the capital city of Male'.) Shaheed said he was personally surprised by the MDP's performance, adding that he had believed Government-backed candidates would be able to parley the Government's energetic tsunami relief efforts into victory at the ballot box. The

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number of eligible voters swelled by more than 57 percent compared with the last People's Majlis elections five years ago, an increase Shaheed attributed to the demographic bulge of Maldivians between the ages of 21-25. The greater percentage of younger voters in the electorate is likely a significant factor in the MDP's solid showing, he theorized.

**¶5.** (SBU) Mohammad Latheef, head of the MDP who lives in Sri Lanka, told poloff on January 24 that the election results constituted "a resounding victory" for his party. (Note: Maldivian law does not recognize political parties, and the MDP is not registered as a party in Maldives. Because candidates cannot claim a party affiliation when registering, it is often difficult for an outsider to determine which candidates are pro-MDP. MDP critics claim that the organization adopts a particularly liberal and inclusive view of its membership, dubbing many unaffiliated winners as MDP

candidates in an effort to appear more popular. Many MDP leaders, including Latheef, citing the fear of arrest and suppression in Maldives, live in self-imposed exile in Sri Lanka and other countries. End note.) The MDP's strong performance at the polls was a clear mandate, he said, which the Government should recognize by legalizing the party. When asked if the "resounding victory" was evidence that the elections were free and fair, Latheef demurred, claiming that the Government had actively discouraged many sure-to-win MDP candidates from running in the election in the first place.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: With the counting continuing and the reports from the assorted international, national and regional election observers still pending, it is too early to pass judgment on the freeness or fairness of the polls. With only one report so far of a disturbance--and with even the quick-to-complain Latheef citing only pre-election atmospherics as an inhibiting factor--we have seen no evidence so far that these elections were any less free or fair than previous polls. That they took place at all--and more or less on schedule--is a tribute to Government efficiency and organization--as well as an indication of the degree of internal and international pressure it felt to conduct a credible exercise. If pro-reform candidates post as strong a showing as expected, it will be become increasingly difficult for the Government to ignore calls to move toward a party system.

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